

## REMAPPING SHIFTING TERRAINS: NOTES ON TEACHING ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LITERATURE (S) IN ENGLISH IN NON-NATIVE CONTEXTS

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### ABSTRACT

*The nativization of English globally, and the globalization of local aspirations worldwide has made the people working in the field of education fraught with an ambivalent attitude towards the teaching of English literature and literature (s) in English in non-native contexts. There is a need to remap the shifting terrains of diverse positions and representations from Thomas Macaulay (1835) to Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1981), from Beowulf to The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1976), from the Leavisian belief in 'essential Englishness' ( Eagleton [1983]1996: 32) to the rise of New Englishes in 'modernized' registers amalgamated from 'the alchemy of English' (Kachru [1986] 1995: 295), from the myth of authenticity to the voices of subversion and rejection, from the native to the non-native models, their production and consumption, from colonization through decolonization to educational neocolonization charting the language-literature debate, literature-culture controversy, language-ideology-power construct and literature as discourse stance. There is also a need to see beyond the veil of language through literature proposition which, unfortunately, cannot take us far, though appealing on the surface, yet inadequate in its theoretical rigor and limited in its application to the present needs of the learner. The paper, therefore, argues for a comprehensive remapping of all the areas of debates, controversies and discussions to make literature teaching more learner-centered, more practical and viable in the fast changing global scenario, when English literature and literature (s) in English are viewed as substantial resource globally, to prepare the learner with a broad language base ' with [his/her] own linguistic and cultural ecologies' providing 'access to attitudinally and materially desirable domains of power and knowledge' 'equipping [him/her] in the process for new societal, scientific and technological demands' (Ibid: 294-95).*

**KEYWORDS:** 'Essential Englishness,' 'The Alchemy of English,' The Myth of Authenticity & Educational Neocolonization

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### INTRODUCTION

I would like to introduce the topic of my paper with my comments, which I made in my paper presented (*in absentia*) at the Seminar on "Revisiting Language and Literature: Key Issues" organized by the Dept of English, North Eastern Hill University, Tura campus, Meghalay, India on Nov 3-4, 2003,

The twentieth century has witnessed a shift from the interest in the canonical to the regional/ local, from the study of pure literature to language-based approaches, making English language teaching a massive money-spinning global industry (Prasad 2003).

In this paper, I also quoted Romesh Thapar (1986:13) the then editor of *Seminar*, who, in its May 1986 number underscores the reasons for the importance of English as the global vehicle of communication.

In the same paper, I also quoted David Crystal (1995: 3) from his *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* who has given, along with other reasons -- reasons for the *importance* and *usefulness* of the English language which has become "the chief means of communication *between nations* or *just the ordinary people at home*, trying to understand and be understood." (Emphasis added). In this context, I would like to refer to his 2002 estimate (qtd. In Durmuller: 2003), which suggests that 400 million people speak English as a first language, and that another 400 million use English as a second language, while the number of speakers of English as a foreign language would reach a billion.

It is necessary to mention that the nativization /internationalization of English have significantly changed what once could be professed as one language and one literature. Here, I would like to quote from my paper presented at the First International ELT Conference organized by the Department of English, Hodeidah University on April 1, 2002, in which I stressed that the teaching/learning of language and literature cannot take place in a vacuum. Literature is a human achievement and this singular human achievement, is the result of "the interaction of social, cultural and historical factors and the psychological and emotional aspects in which language plays a major role" (p 229). And English today in many nations "is simply an additional language" (as in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Oman<sup>1</sup>) (Durmuller: 2003), not "a national and/or official language" (Ibid.) (unlike The USA or UK or in India respectively).

The case of English does not "stand" today, as advocated by Thomas Macaulay in his *Minute on Indian Education* (1935) with an aim "to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue". As a lingua Franca it ought to be neutral tool, but as a medium for literary creation it is sure to be an ideological protagonist (I beg to differ from Durmuller [2003] who says that "English as lingua Franca ought to be neutral tool rather than an ideological protagonist"). The very fact that Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1981) "argued the case for the abolition of the [present] Department of English in the college, and the establishment of African Literature and Languages... on various grounds, the most important one being that education is a means of knowledge about ourselves " proves that it is an ideological protagonist. The texts of English literature like *The Woman Warrior* (1976) cannot be read without being aware of the different "ideological" positions of Kingston - be it a feminist, anti-Eurocentric, revisionist, or interventionist. The position of "essential Englishness" taken up by F R Leavis (Eagleton [1983]1996: 32) has already taken a different shape by the "alchemy of English" today (Kachru [1986] 1995: 295). The paper will chart all the areas of debate, while analyzing the goals of teaching English literature and literature (s) in English in non-native contexts

## DISCUSSIONS: REMAPPING SHIFTING TERRAINS

The present paper will approach the imperative issue under discussion of teaching English literature and literature(s) in English in non-native contexts by going back to history of why English was introduced to the countries and what were the consequences of this introduction of the 'other tongue'? They are convincingly summarized in the following excerpt by Philip G. Altbach in his essay, *Education and Neocolonialism* ([1971: 452] the postcolonial studies reader 453-54):

Most colonial power, when they concentrated on education at all, stressed humanistic studies, fluency in the language of the metropolitan country and the skills necessary for secondary positions in the bureaucracy.

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<sup>1</sup> My comment

### Altbach Further Analyses the Situation

Colonial educational policies were generally elitist. In India, British educational elitism assumed the title of 'downward filtrations' - a system by which a small group of Indians with a British style education supposedly spread enlightenment to the masses (see McCully 1943). 'French assimilationist' policies also worked in this direction. Indigenous cultures, in many cases highly developed, were virtually ignored by colonial educational policy. Trends towards modernization, in many cases spurred by European-style education, were at the same time skewed by foreign control of the educational system. (Ibid)

English literature started with the support of the Cambridge academics as a 'civilizing' and 'humanizing' subject to promote the 'civilizing' Leavisian belief in 'essential Englishness' (Eagleton [1983]1996: 32) that will bring the sense of humanity to the world in the face of rampant industrialization. It was the reinforcement of the Arnoldian idea of literature as a humanizing activity (Widowson 1999: 56) that advocated that certain literary texts have an intrinsic artistic worth that should be read profitably without references to history or time. They are the embodiment of universal ideas that apply to all beyond the restricting limits of time and place. This belief in 'essential Englishness' created "in many classrooms a lingering nostalgia of authoritative texts" (Eagleton 2000: 54-55) which look with suspicion at the texts produced outside the "inner circle" of the traditional base of English (Kachru (1985) quoted in Crystal 1995: 109).

The canonized literary productions are Universalists in thematic orientations with specific cultural and Eurocentric framework. Harold Bloom (1994) considerably and defensively calls them "great books" of "cultured mind." He faces opposition from number of important persons in the field such as Toni Morrison (see Todd 1992) Arthur Applebee (1993), John Guillory (1993), Elaine Showalter<sup>2</sup> (2003), Rachel Donadio<sup>3</sup> (2007), and quite recently from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie<sup>4</sup> (2009) on the grounds that English literature should be taught in today's classrooms by moving itself beyond the linear historical view of subject 'English' as a 'civilizing force' to the new terrains that allows multiple ways to look at a literary production.

Evidently, English is not one language today. It speaks in many voices, and in many registers. The Anglo-American impact on its spread, and variety is uncontested yet "[T]he majority of EFL interactions worldwide take place between speakers for none of whom English is the mother tongue and for none of whom English is a cultural symbol. "Therefore it has been rightly remarked that, "In the chorus of World English, their [ cf Kachru "inner circle authors" ] voices may be the loudest, they may no longer indicate the rhythm and melody. " (Durmuller: 2003).

Obviously, while doing work on new immigrant literature in the context of Asian American fiction, I came across a host of writers their books and anthologies who have made their names in "Literatures written in English" and they have

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<sup>2</sup> Elaine Showalter, a feminist literary scholar and a former president of the Modern Language Association, who retired from Princeton in 2003, today urges **a reconsideration** of some of the changes made in past decades. "This period of discovery and recovery (for example, of women writers) has been stimulating, exciting and renewing," Showalter wrote in an e-mail message, "**But now it's time for a period of evaluation and consolidation.**"

<sup>3</sup>Referring to the problem of the canon, Donadio says "I'm often impressed by this scholarship...but I see too many scholars in the field who know very little about anything before the 20th century, and that concerns me."

<sup>4</sup> Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie would seem to agree there's a problem with the Canon's singularity. In a recent TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Talk (2009), two decades after Achebe's "Image of Africa" first surfaced, Adichie warned of the dangers of what she calls a "single story" about a place or people, and discusses the early effects of reading English stories devoid of Africans.

their places in the curricula of the Departments of English Studies not to speak of the Anglo-American Universities but in the Departments of English Studies in the Universities worldwide. In my abstract I have referred to Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* which is included in the curricula of the English Departments worldwide. This text defies classification into conventional genres because of its theme (s) and style. It is about the identity of a Chinese American in American culture with a voice of a protagonist displaced from culture, gender and genre, voice that moves between biography and autobiography, fact and fiction and Asian talk-story and American memoir. This text is a unique one not only in literary studies but also in translation studies because of its non-linear, quasi-fictional, heteroglossic account of an author-protagonist relationship with a migratory vision. It shows a great shift away from *Beowulf*, the sole survivor of what may have been a glorious epic tradition in the literature, being written in the modern idiom, which the student of today must be familiar with.

The *Woman Warrior*, along with many others, represents what Durmuller in her paper presented at a conference at the University of London, July 17-19, 2003 "the rhythm and melody" of the English today. How can there be a musical performance without its rhythm and melody? How can there be an English Department only with the inclusion of only those texts which are away from the "linguistic and cultural ecologies" (Kachru [1986] 1995 294-95) of the English of today? How can we ignore the beneficiaries of the teaching programs by neglecting the productions delaying the consumption of fresh productions and by overlooking the "new" hybridization of power and discourse in the neocolonial postulations of the anglocentric impact on the university teaching of English today" (Docker 1978: 443)? It is unwise to ignore the new shifts which are taking place in the field of academia worldwide as Twentieth century has witnessed a global shift.

Despite the paradigm shift in the academic world, we cannot ignore the language-literature 'complimentarily' in a literary text as two of the important definitions will amply prove. Ezra Pound in his book *ABC of Reading* (1934) comes out with a definition of Literature, in which he talks about the "News"<sup>5</sup> value of Literature. His contemporary William Carlos Williams in his poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" emphasizes ironically the "News"<sup>6</sup> value of poetry that is an elixir of life for the people in such a way that the lack of it would be fatal. If we summarize the various definitions of Literature, we will come to the conclusion that a piece of literature can be broadly divided into two levels: on the level of 'What is said' (Linguistic Competence) and "How it is said" (Literary Competence). An understanding of the two levels of a literary text helps us 'think' and 'understand' the world in which we live as literature 'foregrounds' language, ideas, human condition and aesthetic beauty.

### **Language through Literature Proposition: A thorough Consideration**

The issue of Teaching English literature in non-native context dates back to the early years of the nineteenth century, particularly in a British colonial setup, with the aim to make English literary education as a cultural ideal and to give a specific example of a colonial education, as Gauri Viswanathan (1987: 434) points out,

That British colonial administrators, provoked by missionaries on the one hand and fears of native subordination on the other, discovered an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education. With both secularism and religion appearing as political liabilities, literature appeared to represent a perfect synthesis of these two opposing positions.

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<sup>5</sup>"Literature is news that STAYS news."

<sup>6</sup> "It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there."

The spate of creativity in English language was seen during 1930s a kind of “creative impulse” (Sridhar 1982: 291) that took the spark from nationalist movements in the Third World” countries. This gave impetus to the “growth of bilingualism” and the “debureaucratization of English” (Ibid.). This explains the “choice of English for creativity” (Ibid. 292).

And again, it gained ground from the early years of the twentieth century for a different reason stated above, “when literature was considered of high prestige in language study and access to literary work was assumed part of the purpose of language learning (Widdowson 1984 qtd. In Zafeiriadou 2001). The approach was characterized by a concentration on the classics assuming that if the students were continually exposed to the best uses of the English language, it would in some sense ‘rub off’ on their own performance in the English language. (Short and Cadlin 1989:91 qtd. In Zafeiriadou 2001).

Understandably, in the English departments there has been a shift. What I have deliberated earlier is very relevant here:

“The post-World War scenario of English literature teaching has been profoundly influenced by this trend of language through literature and therefore emphasizes on language-based approaches. In recent years, the language-based approaches have gained a much wider acceptance in pedagogy than previously. Carter and Long (1990 p 217) are of the view that an interactive protocol of teaching literature would ‘foster an activity-oriented, student-centered, and language-sensitive approach’. This activity-oriented, student-centered approach to teaching literature emphasizes the individuality of the students and relies on group discussion, questioning and reflecting.

Recent studies (Akyel and Yalcin: 1990; Birch: 1989; Brumfit: 1985; Carter: 1988; Carter and Long: 1990.1991; Carter and Nash: 1990; Carter and Simpson: 1989; Collie and Slater: 1987; Duff and Maley; Lazar: 1993) in this area have shown that when a learner is exposed to literary texts he uses his linguistic knowledge to the maximum to interpret the meaning. In the course of doing so he/she learns the language. Besides, his/her awareness of the ‘word’ and the ‘world’ reaches a broader horizon with the enhanced linguistic competence and performance”. (Prasad 2010: 49-50)

But, shift like these from literature to language through literature emphasized linguistic competence rather than enhancing both the literary and linguistic competencies, thereby creating a gap in the learners overall understanding of perspective. Hence there is a need to go beyond the veil of language through literature proposition.

### **Literary Competence vs. Linguistic Competence**

Learners might achieve some kind of a level of linguistic competence, but they need literary competence to be able to read, understand and analyze a text. To internalize the grammar of language is not enough to achieve this goal, but to internalize the ‘grammar’ of literature is necessary to ‘convert linguistic sequences into literary sequences and meaning.’

“Mere emphasis on the language through literature will be like, so to say, developing the grammatical sense of the students without developing their literary sensibility.” (Culler 1975:114)

The notion of ‘Literary competence’ is also propagated by Terence Hawkes in his book *Structuralism and Semiotics* (1977) and Michael Riffaterre in his book *Semiotics in Poetry* (1978).

Learners should be encouraged to think that literature is not different from language.

There is a need to make the classroom teaching 'interactive', so that the learner should be made aware of the importance of the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking and to integrate all these skills for a better understanding of the English language and literature.

## NEW CHALLENGES IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

### Assimilation and Invention: The Need of the Hour

The question of literature-culture controversy is concomitant with educational neocolonization. Texts like Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Hemingway's short stories and novels, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Hanif Kureisi's *Budhha of Suburbia* (1990), Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent I* (2004), Meena Alexander's *Nampalli Road* (1991), *Manhattan Music* (1997), Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* (1991), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), Ha Jin's *Waiting* (1999), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichies's *Americanah* (2013), to name a few, from the canonical to the non-canonical or acanonical will certainly increase the intercultural competence of the learners. They will be a point of entry to begin with the new trends of reading and interpretation of literature today. Those, who are advocates of "do-not-spoil-my-culture-please" should not feel wary of these texts on at least two grounds, a) the teacher can "refresh" the text by offering a change in the context and relevance of the text by connecting it to the contemporary events, b) by emphasizing the development of both linguistic and literary competence of the learner.

In this context, I would like to reiterate what I have already said before that,

"Looking at the social, academic and vocational needs of the learners of English in the Third World countries, it is "the need of the hour to evolve an integrated approach to teaching English literature in the college/university classrooms." (Prasad 2010: 51).

This integrated approach calls for the spirit of tolerance and assimilation, tolerance for the traditional approaches to teaching English literature and a clear perspective and confidence to assimilate the recent language-based, learner-centered, activity-oriented approaches to teaching literature. (Prasad: 2002). This combination of the old and the new is particularly suitable/appropriate for the countries where learners are facing the problems of denials of opportunities, which hinder them to use the English language as the language of communication outside the classroom. The syllabus designers should pay particular attention to the fact that the text selected should be combination of the English literature and the literatures of English to help the learners to compare and contrast the ideological, social, and cultural constructs of these texts.

The teacher, as the facilitator of teaching/learning, can offer a change in the cultural context of the text to create interest and 'refresh' the text that belongs to a bygone era and therefore culturally different. For example, while teaching Shakespeare, we can rescue Shakespeare from an intangible 'greatness' and make his works meaningful to students and their lives in today's world by examining the relevance of his work to contemporary events, and historicizing the text that connects Shakespeare's and our own. The emphasis should be on both the development of language as the medium of communication and the teaching/learning of literature as the vehicle of the exposure to the language.

## CONCLUSIONS

Literature is not as Sir Anthony Absolute, says of the novel in *The Rivals* an evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge, which is going to "upset" the linguistic sense of the learner. Rather, in reality, it is an aid to linguistic

competence of the learner. Philosophically, the relationships of language and literature, in the Derridaean sense, are based on "complimentarity." Traversing the journey of English literature teaching from the teaching of aesthetic beauty of Literature to language through literature to language as discourse to language as cultural vehicle, I propose for making literature-teaching in the EFL setting in K.S.A. more learner-centered, more activity-oriented, more practical and viable. Literature teaching requires continued refinement and updating of the new paradigm shifts. Besides, teaching literature is not effectively possible without genuine passion for it among the educators. It is not just any other livelihood we, the teachers should take the lead to bring about change keeping in view of the global shifts in teaching and learning, because society looks towards us for guidance, invention and intervention.

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